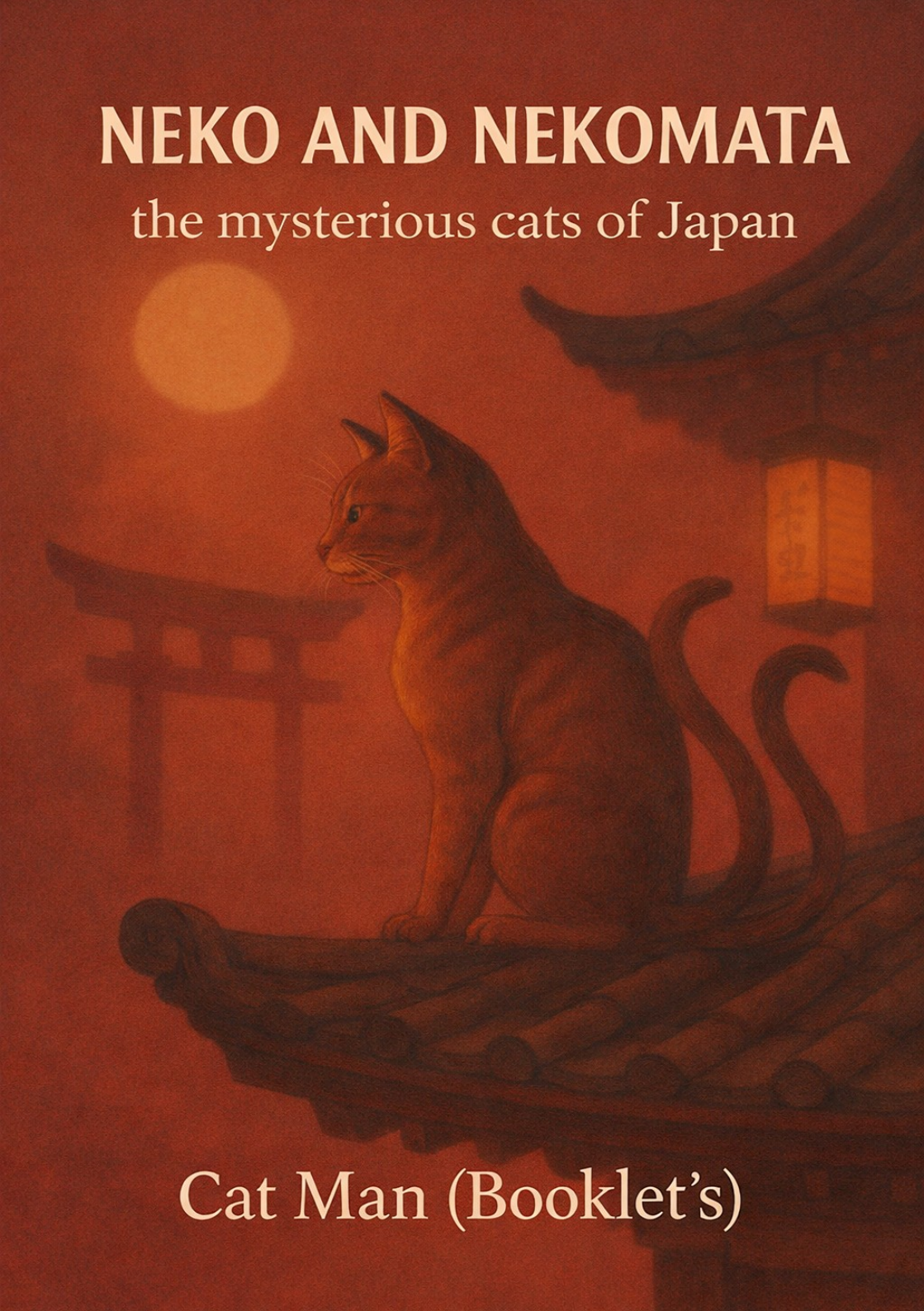
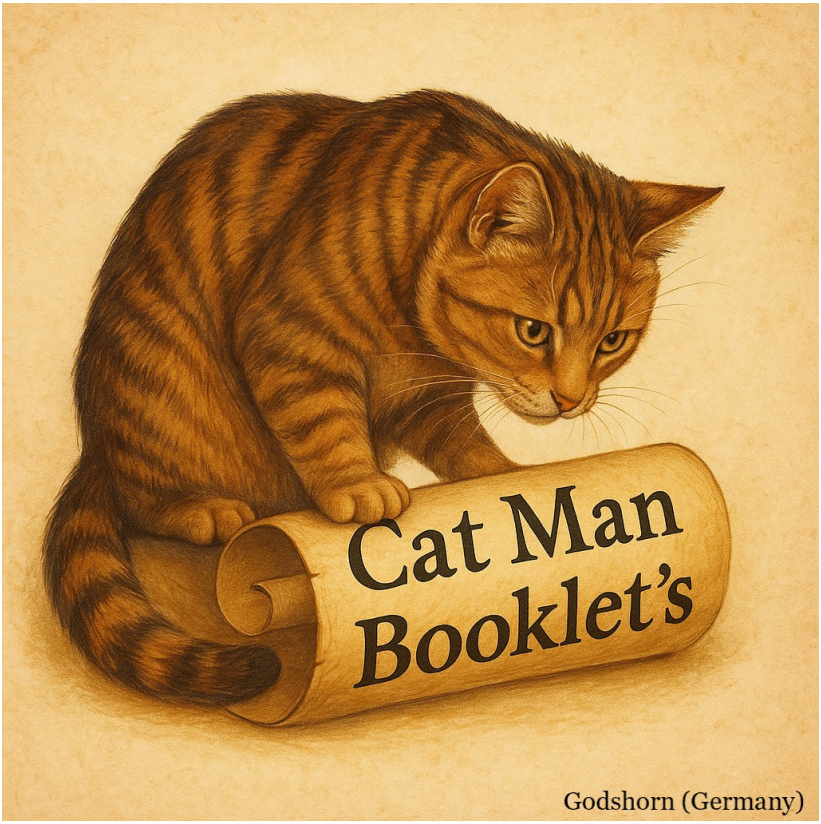
NEKO AND NEKOMATA

the mysterious cats of Japan



Cat Man (Booklet's)


Cat Man
Booklet's
Godshorn (Germany)

Neko and Nekomata
The Mysterious Cats of Japan

Elsewhere, too
a place to sleep is foreign to him,
the stray tailless tomcat --
His cry—who might she be,
who promises tender bonds?

Jakuren Hoshi, *1139 ✝ 1202)

As this little poem tells us, Japanese cats look different from cats elsewhere in the world. A traveler who went ashore in Yokohama reports:

When the ship docked, I noticed a cat striding proudly across the harbor wall. 'Why doesn't it hold its tail high, as other cats do when they walk confidently?' I asked myself. I looked more closely and saw that the poor cat had no tail at all. I felt sorry for it; but then I noticed other cats prowling among the sacks and crates: they had no tails either! I turned to a Japanese man standing next to me who was also watching our ship dock: "Why don't the cats in this city have tails? Who took them away?" The Japanese man smiled, put his finger to his lips, and said only: "Our cats are good cats!"

Yes! Why do many cats in Japan have no tails? And why do the Japanese believe that cats without tails are good cats?

The reason is an old Japanese folk belief that all animals with tails are evil and dangerous.
The longer the tail, the worse. Demons dwell in tails! Animals with long, forked tails are the worst.
Anyone who encounters such an animal, e.g., such a cat, is immediately bewitched: the demon of the tail slips into the person, takes possession of them, and commits wicked deeds in their form! To prevent this, the Japanese began cutting off cats' tails at an early stage; after all, no one wants demons in their own home! Many generations of cats experienced having their tails cut off until the cats apparently thought: "Let's spare ourselves the painful procedure! Let's just give up our tails in advance!"

The cats' tail bones atrophied. They are still there, but they no longer develop properly in Japanese cats. It is now rare for a Japanese cat mother to have kittens with tails—and when it does happen, the cat's owner—at least in the past—immediately ensures that the demons are exorcised from the little cats!

The history of the Japanese cat

How did cats come to Japan? How did the Japanese become acquainted with cats? Cats probably came to the island kingdom together with Buddhist teachings in the 6th century AD. A legend tells the following story: Enshin, a famous old priest of the Tendai sect, traveled to China for several years to study and collect sacred Buddhist texts. He made many copies and also acquired many of the precious books. When he had finished his work, he took thick bundles of paper and large boxes of books with him onto the ship that was to take him back home.

Before the ship left the harbor, however, Enshin noticed that there were many rats in the hold of the boat, and he hurriedly got a cat to guard the valuable collection. The cat proved its worth! The sacred books arrived in Japan intact. The capable cat was given the title "golden cat," both because of its yellowish fur and its preciousness. It was, after all, the first cat in Japan, and the most precious of all goods, divine writings, were entrusted to it. This cat was said to have magical powers. And even in the future, no cat was ever allowed to be missing in the temples to protect the writings. So, at first, Japanese cats were a kind of library guard.

The first cats in Japan led a life like scholars: they sat in dark rooms poring over books and rarely got any fresh air. They were probably pale and thin; the joys of life were unknown to them, and they reproduced only sparingly.

Cats at the emperor's court

But even when cats were no longer so rare and precious, they continued to enjoy a privileged position at the imperial court:
they occupied the fifth highest place in the hierarchy, the same as the ladies-in-waiting. It is said that there was once a lady-in-waiting who was jealous of a cat because it was considered to be as important as she was. She secretly got hold of a dog and set it on the cat. The dog bit the cat. The lady-in-waiting was then summoned to the emperor: He ordered that the dog be beaten and that it be expelled from the court. However, he threatened the lady with dismissal, even though she had been his own nurse and caregiver. Only this privilege saved the lady-in-waiting from being sent away from the palace in disgrace!

However, much of what the cats at the imperial court were subjected to may not always have been particularly pleasant for them. There were court hairdressers especially for cats, who combed and perfumed the animals every day. But what saddened the imperial cats most was that they always had to be kept on leashes, even if they were golden ones. The emperor had good reason to fear that his precious animals might one day choose freedom and be lost to him.

The emperor cared little that the leashes prevented the cats not only from roaming freely, but also from catching mice. For he believed that his cats were so formidable that their mere presence was enough to scare away any mouse or rat. Indeed, he was convinced that no mouse had ever dared to set foot in the palace grounds.

He attributed such great magical powers to his cats that he seriously believed that all mice and rats were so afraid that they had long since left his empire and would never dare to approach the borders of Japan again.

The farmers, millers, and silkworm breeders believed something similar: if they could afford a cat, they too tied the expensive animal to a leash so that it would not get lost, believing that it would still perform the desired service.

And those for whom a cat was unaffordable contented themselves with a cat doll made of clay and straw or even just a picture of a cat, believing that the magical power inherent in these representations was so great that it acted as a protective barrier around their house and yard against rodents. The most famous was a miraculous picture by the painter Nitta: It was said that a rat that encountered this image was struck dead on the spot. Many copies of this image were then made and sold for a high price. Silkworm breeders, who suffered great damage from rodents, bought the image and hung it in the most vulnerable places, with unshakeable confidence in its magical power.

But the mice and rats were not particularly impressed by this; instead, they had fun with the pictures and dolls. At night, they danced around the artificial cats, mocked them, climbed on top of the cat dolls, knocked them over, and even dirtied them! And the cats? They were unhappy! They hated the leashes, and all the compliments people gave them about their magic couldn't comfort them, not even the exquisite food they were served every day.

So, the "Neko" was a mysterious animal. It was rare, expensive, and held in high esteem by the emperor. When the cats then multiplied rapidly—despite the leashes—and were no longer so rare, their value declined. The cat's fame faded. Nevertheless, the cats were not set free: from around the 12th century onwards, the Japanese began to regard cats as dangerous beasts that had to be tied not only with leashes but even with thick ropes, because otherwise they would cause harm! At this time, it also became common practice to cut off cats' tails.

It was believed that tailless cats threatened human life and limb: they would stalk people at night, hunt demons, torment anyone who encountered them, and sometimes even kill them.
The most dangerous were old cats, those over 10 years old: they emitted a mysterious, destructive light at night, and many who had such a cat in their house had lost all their possessions.

In Japan, people now also remembered old legends that attributed evil to cats, such as the legend that describes the death of Buddha.
Buddha:

When Buddha died, all the animals gathered around his body and wept. Only the snake and the cat did not weep. As the mourning grew more and more intense and the cries of grief grew louder and louder, a rat appeared and approached the lamp that was burning on the catafalque, near the
head of the great dead man. It began to lick up the oil. The cat
pounced on the rat, killed it, and ate it.

This was a great sin! For Buddha had commanded that all living beings should love one another, that none should cause the death of another. And right there at the coffin of the great teacher, the cat had disregarded the commandment. That was enough for the Commission for Astronomical Calculations and Calendars at the court of the Emperor of Japan to remove the cat from the zodiac!

The cat with the demon soul

But other ancient cat legends were also taken up in Japan at this time and embellished and altered to the cat's disadvantage:
"Neko" became "Nekomata," the beloved animal became a demon, a monster. In the 14th century, people began to believe in the existence of a terrible giant cat that lived in the forests and remote mountain valleys. It was said to have a forked tail or even two tails, and anyone who encountered it was beyond help. We read about this in Tsurezuregusa:

Although people say that nekomata only roam in the depths of the mountains, others assure us that even outside the mountains, even in the Kyoto area, old cats transform themselves into nekomata and kill people. A Buddhist monk who heard about this thought to himself: "Then you have to be very careful when walking alone at night!"
One evening, as he was returning home late at night along the bank of a stream, he suddenly sensed a creature rushing towards him. He stopped and wanted to flee – but it had already jumped at his throat. The monk had no strength to defend himself. In his terror, he tried to escape somewhere, stumbled into the stream, and nearly drowned. He cried out, "Help! Help! A nekomata!" People came running from nearby houses with torches.
They pulled the priest out of the water. He had lost all the money he had collected. But the people told him he should be glad to have escaped with his life, and they hurried back to their houses, agitated and frightened.

Only in a much later version do we read the addition:

In reality, the nekomata was nothing more than the priest's dog, which had come out of the darkness to meet its master and
exuberantly.

In the 14th and 15th centuries, the story was still being passed on without this ending. Imagination had turned a faithful dog into an evil nekomata.

More and more incredible legends arose, more and more terrifying stories of encounters with nekomata.
The Chinese superstition that a cat—and it did not even have to be a nekomata—that climbed over a corpse would resurrect the dead was also accepted in Japan: it was therefore customary to plant spears, knives, and swords around a deceased person so that no cat could approach.
"Animal of darkness," "house tiger" (tegai no tora) – such names were given to cats.

Old cats in particular had a bad reputation in Japan. They were believed to have the supernatural ability to walk on two legs, dance and sing, and even transform themselves into women.
Old cats could devour old women and then take on their form. Suddenly, the dear old house mother would reveal an unpleasant nature, become malicious and scratchy, begin to avoid cheerful company, become nagging, prefer to live in a dark, locked room, and drink improbably large quantities of wine there.

According to legend, such a transformed cat once lived in Yoshida Castle in Sanshu, where it wreaked terrible havoc:

Young women kept disappearing in the area. No one knew what had happened to them until one day a room was discovered in the castle containing a mountain of bones: the bones of the women!
The monster had dragged them all into the castle, killed them, and eaten them.
A courageous and very strong woman agreed to spend a night in the room and wait for the monster. An old woman with a striking nose appeared and sniffed around the room excitedly. It snorted like a horse, its eyes shot fire, and its mouth stretched from ear to ear. When it spotted the woman, it bared its teeth ferociously and began to chatter its jaws, as cats do when they spot their prey. It lunged at the woman greedily and tried to throw her to the ground. But the woman grabbed the old woman by the head and pushed her down—it roared horribly, like a dying lion, and crashed to the ground: a dead cat with a forked tail lay there!

Of course, it was very difficult to recognize such an old cat walking around in human form. The Japanese therefore trained dogs specifically to identify such disguised cats. The following story tells of this:

An old woman who loved cats very much once found a starving red cat and took it home with her. However, the cat disappeared mysteriously after a few days, and the woman changed in an equally mysterious way. She was afflicted with an eye disease, locked herself in a room, and shunned the light. She did not even open the door to the doctor who wanted to visit her, but sent him

away with rude and harsh words. A few days later, two maids who were employed in the house suddenly disappeared.
No one could explain the absence of the loyal and amiable girls until one day a farmhand found the maids' clothes and human bones in a pit behind the house. The farmhand was terrified.
In mortal fear, he looked around. He took the clothes and wanted to go to the master of the house, the old woman's son, to report the gruesome find.
But then the old woman stood in his way, snatched the maids' clothes from his hands and hissed with an evil face: "Be quiet! If you go to my son and tell him anything about these clothes, I will devour you too!" The farmhand trembled with fear; he went to the son to ask for his dismissal. But the woman's strange behavior also began to attract the attention of the neighbors. Rumors spread that she was a nekomata; in any case, dogs began to bark furiously wherever she appeared. One morning, early in the day, when the gates were still closed, a neighbor noticed the old woman coming home, washing her bloody mouth at the stream, and then jumping nimbly like a cat over the hedge into the yard. But the yard dog attacked her, bit her arm, and chased her into the house. The neighbor told this story to the son, and he said, "No doubt the red cat has devoured my mother and taken her form. My mother used to pray to Buddha often and offer him fragrant herbs and flowers. But since last summer, she has never made any offerings. She also always hides in the dark and avoids me. Let's set the dogs on her to see what happens!" The son brought five good dogs and opened the door to his mother's room for them.

The dogs rushed in furiously and threw themselves on the woman—the red cat was lying on the floor, twitching!

In general, there seem to have been particularly close relationships between women and cats in Japan. There is not a single story in which a man has been turned into a cat; it is always women, mostly old, but sometimes also young, as in the following account:

An unhappy man went to a priest to complain about his suffering and seek advice. He had to wait in the anteroom for some time. Then three young, charming, and not exactly shy or even bashful women appeared. They teased the sad man and did not behave at all as one would expect in a priest's house. The man was surprised by the company, but allowed himself to be cheered up. However, he said nothing to the priest when he was finally called in.

Because the sad man's mood had already improved, he no longer needed much comfort from the priest, and the audience could soon be ended. But when the man returned to the room, he found only three cats there instead of the three beauties. He turned to the priest and whispered to him who he had encountered in the room before the conversation. The priest was deeply shocked, chased the cats out of the house, and shouted after them that they were cursed nekomata. However, the visitor fell ill a few days later and died unexpectedly. The nekomata had cast evil glances at him, cursed him, and thus killed him.

The superstition that a woman could be hiding in every cat, or a nekomata in every woman, led to people in Japan being very cautious in their dealings with cats and women.

The resurgence of the cat

The enslavement of cats lasted for almost 600 years in Japan.
From around 1400 to 1500, they enjoyed the worst reputation. In 1602, however, an imperial decree was issued throughout the country declaring that the idea that cats were demons, evil spirits, even thieves and murderers, was nonsense, concluding with the sentence: "All cats are to be released from their ropes and set free immediately; furthermore, it is henceforth forbidden to buy or sell cats.
Anyone who violates this order will be punished with heavy fines."

How did this order come about? One story gives the following explanation:
The emperor once gave a grand party for his birthday. Many foreign guests were present, and the emperor proudly showed all the guests his favorite cat, the magnificent Mao-Miu-Min. So-Siu, the emperor's son, held her on a leash, and the guests admired her and wondered why she was tied up. One of the guests, a diplomat from China, asked the emperor whether the cat always walked on a leash, and when the emperor answered in the affirmative, he asked how it could catch mice.

The emperor proudly informed the diplomat that this cat was a miracle cat and that its mere presence drove away all rodents. The Chinese man did not quite believe this claim, but he was polite and did not want to contradict the great emperor, so he just bowed silently.

Shortly afterwards, the emperor and empress opened the dance, and then disaster struck:
one of the empress's precious pearl-studded earrings fell to the floor. All the guests searched for the piece of jewelry, but no one could find it. Suddenly, the company froze in horror: a little mouse was rolling the earring in front of it, straight toward a mouse hole. "How did a mouse get into my palace?!" thought the emperor gruffly. The only one who had the presence of mind to do the right thing was So-Siu, the emperor's son: with lightning speed, he cut Mao-Miu-Min's leash. The cat caught the mouse with a mighty leap and laid it at the emperor's feet, along with the empress's earring!
The next day, the emperor is said to have issued the order to free the cats.

But perhaps it was simply that during the 600 years that the cats had been tied up, the mice and rats had multiplied more and more and were becoming increasingly shameless in their attacks on people's property. The realization dawned that the magical power of cats was no longer sufficient to combat the pests, that the real power of cats had to be called upon.

Since the order was issued, the lives of Japanese cats improved. Not only were they finally free, but the stories of demons and nekomata gradually faded into oblivion. Cats once again became good creatures in the consciousness of the people, and people began to tell friendly stories about them again, such as the following:

In a city, there were once two cake bakeries, located right next to each other.
next to each other. One employed five assistants and was always full of customers.

The other did almost no business. By chance, the famous woodcarver Hidari Jingoro came to this town. He entered the poor cake shop, asked for "mochi," which means cake, and then asked, "Why is the shop doing so badly?" The owner lamented, "Oh! Since my husband died, no one has any confidence in the business anymore!
Things are getting worse and worse! Customers who were loyal for years are leaving me and preferring the other cake baker. He is getting richer and richer, and I am getting poorer every day!" Hidari Jingoro is said to have replied, "I will make your shop famous!" He asked for a piece of wood, and before the woman had handed him the cakes, he had already carved a small cat out of it. He placed it on the table and said, "Take the cat, and your business will flourish!" He then paid for the cakes by placing the money in front of the cat. Immediately, the cat grabbed the money and, with a deft and comical movement, put it in the cash box. From that day on, the poor widow's business picked up again! The wonderful little cat attracted people. Everyone wanted to see how it collected the money, and many bought more cakes than they could eat.

This legend is the reason why in Japan you will find a small cat, a "Maneki-Neko," which means "beckoning cat," in most teahouses. The "maneki-neko" is a bit like a little witch: it tempts people to enter the teahouse, beckoning them with its paws, urging them to take a seat and order expensive food and drinks.

Of course, it is a witch with good qualities—at least from the perspective of the innkeepers. All Japanese innkeepers worship and pamper their "maneki-neko"; they decorate them with ribbons, often with rings.

And if an innkeeper does not have a live "maneki-neko," then at least one carved from wood. Those who speculate on very good business even find it advantageous to obtain two "calling cats," one wooden and one alive.

Cats have also become important and useful to the Japanese in other areas. Sailors and fishermen never forget to take a three-colored cat (black, white, brown) with them on their voyages. These cats are said to be true "weather forecasters." As soon as a storm is approaching, they climb the mast. And they are even said to have magical powers that enable them to keep storms at bay and ward them off! They also protect ships from the souls of shipwreck victims who can never rest and wander endlessly on the waves. Such three-colored animals, especially the striped ones, are still rare today. However, a junk owner will pay any price to get his hands on a three-colored miracle cat.

One such miraculous cat must have been the one that, according to Shosan Chomon Kishu's report in 1795, unexpectedly said to its master, the abbot of a monastery, in a loud human voice as he was scaring away the pigeons: "What a pity!"
The abbot started, grabbed the cat, looked it in the face, and said threateningly, "What? You can talk? Are you a cat or are you a human? Or are you a cat that haunts and bewitches humans? I'll teach you a lesson!"

The cat replied: "Stop it! All cats can talk when they are older than ten years. If we lived to be 24 or 25 years old, we could even take on other forms – but none of us cats has ever reached that age." The abbot was satisfied with this answer, let go of the cat, and allowed it to remain in his monastery.

The cat bowed politely three times and was never seen again.

The most wonderful of all Japanese cats, however, was the one reported by Ito Tenzen Chuya, whom he recommended to all people as a role model. The following is reported about her:

Once upon a time, there was a fencing master named Shoken. A large rat was causing trouble in his house. It ran around even in broad daylight. So one day, the master of the house closed the door to the room and gave his cat the opportunity to catch the rat. But the rat jumped at the cat's face and bit it so hard that it ran away screaming. So that didn't work.
So the master of the house brought in several cats that enjoyed a good reputation in the neighborhood and let them into the room. The rat crouched in a corner, and as soon as a cat approached it, it jumped at it, bit it, and sent it running away. The rat looked so fierce that the cats all hesitated to venture near it again. This made the master of the house angry, and he ran after the rat himself to kill it. But it evaded every blow from the experienced fencing master; it darted through the air as fast as lightning, evading his every move, and jumped into his face and bit him. Bathed in sweat, he finally called to his servant: "They say that six or seven cho from here there is a cat that is the most capable in the world. Go and fetch it." The servant brought the cat. It did not seem to differ much from the other cats, looking neither particularly clever nor particularly sharp. So the fencing master did not expect anything special from it, but he opened the door slightly and let it in. The cat entered very calmly and slowly, as if it did not expect anything special. But the rat froze and did not move.

And the cat simply approached it slowly and carried it out in its mouth.

In the evening, the defeated cats gathered at Shoken's house, respectfully invited the old cat to take the seat of honor, knelt before her, and said humbly: "We are all considered capable. We have all trained in this way and sharpened our claws so that we can defeat any kind of rat, even weasels and otters. We never thought there could be such a strong rat. But what skill did you use to defeat it so easily? Don't keep your skill a secret and tell us your secret!" The old cat laughed and said, "You young cats are very capable. But you don't know the right way.

So when you encounter something unexpected, you fail. But first tell me how you trained yourselves."

Then a black cat stepped forward and said, "I come from a house famous for catching rats. I can jump over 2-meter-high screens. I can squeeze through a tiny hole that only a rat can get through. Since I was a child, I have practiced all kinds of acrobatic skills. Even when I'm not quite awake yet, still finding my bearings, and I see a rat running across the beams, I've already got it. But today's rat was stronger, and I suffered the most terrible defeat I've ever had to endure in my life. I am ashamed."

Then a large cat with a tiger skin approached and said: "In the art of knighthood, I believe, it is only the spirit that matters. So I have always practiced it. When I see the enemy, this almighty spirit already captivates him, and I win the victory in advance.

Only then do I advance! Completely unconsciously, as the situation requires.
I banish the rat as I please, to the left or to the right, and meet every turn. I just stare at a rat running across the beam, and it falls down and is mine. But this mysterious rat comes without form and goes without a trace. What is it? I do not know."

Now an older gray cat slowly approached and said: "Yes, really, it came and went as elusive as a god. I tend to reconcile with my counterpart and do not resist it at all.
If the other is stronger than me, I simply give in and do as he wishes, so to speak. My art, so to speak, consists in catching the flying pebbles in a loose curtain. A rat that wants to attack me, no matter how strong it may be, finds nothing to pounce on, nothing to latch onto. But today's rat simply did not play along with my game. I have never seen anything like it."

Then the old woman said: "The only thing that matters is that there is not a hint of self-consciousness in what you do, otherwise everything is ruined.
Only when you are in that state of mind that is free from all consciousness, when you act without acting, without intention or tricks, in harmony with Great Nature, are you on the right path. So let all intention fade away in intentionlessness and let everything simply happen from the essence. This path is endless, inexhaustible."

Several recent cat anecdotes show how much popular belief in Japan has changed in favor of cats since the 18th century:

One tells of a farmer who had a very pretty daughter:

A large, old cat always followed the daughter around, so the farmer believed that the cat was in love with the beautiful girl, was stalking her, and might even harm her. The suspicious farmer therefore lay in wait one day. He held a large hammer behind his back to kill the cat if it revealed any dishonest intentions. But the cat stopped at a distance and said: "Sir, you are mistaken. It is not I who am stalking your daughter, but a large, ugly rat that lives in your hayloft.
That is why I accompany your daughter everywhere. I protect her. But if you call the neighbor's cat, the capable Buchi, I will kill the rat with her help." The farmer followed the advice, and the two cats went in search of the rat. In the middle of the night, the farmer heard a terrible noise in the house, coming from the room where his daughter was sleeping. He jumped up, rushed over, and found the dangerous rat on the floor. It was dead, but the two cats were also seriously injured. They died soon after, even though the farmer did his best to nurse them back to health. The girl, however, was unharmed.

Another story tells of a cat that stole gold coins from its owner:

At first there were two. The cat carried them to a fishmonger who had been ill for some time and was almost starving. In the past, however, he had always given the cat fish scraps. The cat brought him pieces of gold several times, so that the fishmonger could buy the necessities. One day, however, the cat did not come, and from then on it never appeared again.

However, the sick man had recovered from the worst and regained his strength.
He decided to seek out the cat's master and ask him for a loan; he wanted to rebuild his business. The master gave the fishmonger the money he asked for, adding only that he had recently suffered great losses because of a thieving cat that had stolen many gold coins; the cat had had to be killed. Upon hearing these words, the fishmonger sank down before the lord and burst into tears. He reported that the cat had brought him the money and that he owed the cat his life. He took the cat's body with him and buried it in the Buddhist temple Eko-in in Honjo, and had many masses read for the repose of its soul.

There must have been many cats in Japan in more recent times that did good deeds for humans. Every year, at the time of the spring equinox, the Japanese celebrate what is known as Higan Day. The Buddhist calendar designates this time as a period during which all of God's creatures, living and dead, should be treated with special kindness.

Just as we honor the dead on Corpus Christi, on Higan Day in Tokyo, thousands of people, former owners of cats and dogs, gather at the famous Oizumi Cat and Dog Cemetery to commemorate their deceased pets. First, they listen to the words of Buddhist priests in the large temple hall, then they go to the cemetery, where many thousands of pets are buried.
Tall, narrow wooden slats driven into the ground adorn the graves. Names and inscriptions are carved into the slats. There are even family graves surrounded by bamboo fences. Many visitors bring flowers, food, and small treats for their dead animals, which they place on the graves.

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For your notes

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Cat Man (Booklet's)